Two Irish Brothers Made Fairbury Their Home

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.Net
Date: Likely in the month of May 2025

The Harrington brothers emigrated from County Mayo, Ireland, to the Fairbury area because of the Potato Famine in Ireland. According to Wikipedia, the Irish economy grew between 1760 and 1815 due to infrastructure expansion and the Napoleonic Wars (1805–1815), which had increased the demand for food in Britain. Tillage increased to such an extent that only a small amount of land was available to small farmers to feed themselves. The potato was adopted as a primary food source because of its quick growth in a comparatively small space.

By 1800, the potato had become a staple food for one in three Irish people, especially in winter. It eventually became a staple year-round for farmers. A disproportionate share of the potatoes grown in Ireland were the Irish Lumper variety, which created a lack of genetic variability among potato plants, which increased vulnerability to disease.

In 1845, a blight ruined the potato crop, which continued through 1849. In America, this is often called the Irish Potato Famine. The Irish call it the time of the Great Hunger. Roughly one million people died of famine, and between 1845 and 1855, at least 2.1 million people left Ireland. Ireland's population of 8.5 million residents before the Potato Famine only recovered to 5.3 million in 2025.

The story of the Harrington brothers began with Edward Harrington's birth in 1819 in County Mayo, Ireland. Ten years later, in 1829, brother James E. Harrington was born in County Mayo, which is in west-central Ireland. The identity of the parents of Edward and James Harrington has not been verified at this time.

When the Potato Famine started in 1845, Edward Harrington was 26, and James E. Harrington was 16. In 1849, four years after the start of the famine period, brothers Edward and James Harrington decided to emigrate from Ireland to America. Their father had died, so they left their widowed mother in Ireland.

The vast majority of the Irish people who emigrated to America sailed from an English port, and it took six to eight weeks to arrive in New York. A small proportion of the Irish immigrants landed in Mobile, Alabama, instead of New York. Several Irish groups were created in Mobile, and they still exist today.

Edward and James Harrington sailed on a ship for eight weeks before they arrived in Mobile, Alabama, on April 8, 1849. They immediately left Mobile and headed to Cincinnati, Ohio. They likely took a steamboat from Mobile to New Orleans, then another steamboat up the Mississippi River to the Ohio River and Cincinnati.

The two brothers were shocked to find that Cincinnati was in the middle of a massive cholera epidemic. Cholera was a deadly disease, and in that era, it was usually caused by human waste entering the drinking water supply. Approximately 6,000 Cincinnati residents died of cholera in 1849, about five percent of the city's population.

To avoid catching cholera, the two Harrington brothers became farm hands on farms located about 16 miles away from the city. James Harrington received $72 in pay after working for a farmer for one year. This pay would be equivalent to $2,760 in today's dollars. James sent $60 of his $70 in pay back to his widowed mother in Ireland. Edward Harrington was likely paid the same amount as his brother for being a farm hand. During the eight years James Harrington worked for three different farmers in the Cincinnati area, his monthly pay ranged from $6 to $15. This pay would equal $230 to $575 monthly in today's dollars.

On May 20, 1853, James Harrington married Bridget McGreal, another Irish immigrant, in the Cincinnati area. They were both 23 years old when they married. They had nine children. Son Edward Harrington (1857-1935) was named after his brother Edward Harrington (1819-1908).

About one year later, on October 5, 1854, Edward Harrington married Irish immigrant Kathryn Bryde. Edward was 35 and Kathryn was 24 when they married. They had nine children. Son James E. Harrington (1857-1950) was named after his brother James Harrington (1829-1911). The fact that the two brothers named a son after their brother can make understanding the family tree difficult.

In 1857, the James Harrington family moved from Cincinnati to Fairbury. Traveling by covered wagon to Fairbury took them 17 days, an average of about 17 miles per day. In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. The James Harrington family arrived in Fairbury on March 27, 1857, before the railroad tracks had been completed from Fairbury to Indiana. James Harrington rented a farm southwest of Fairbury.

Two years after the James Harrington family decided to emigrate from Ohio to Fairbury, the Edward Harrington family decided to also come to Fairbury. Edward Harrington helped his brother James Harrington farm southwest of Fairbury. The Harrington brothers eventually purchased farmland in Indian Grove township southwest of Fairbury.

The James Harrington branch of the family became nationally known because of his son, Austin Harrington (1865-1949), who became a dealer in fine horses. Austin Harrington went into business with Frank Ford under the firm name of Ford & Harrington. They continued buying and selling market horses and sold to the largest importers of Percheron, Belgian, Shires, and Hackney horses. In 1906, Ford & Harrington began importing horses, stallions, and mares directly from European breeders. In 1907, the firm expanded by opening horse barns in Parker, South Dakota, and Pueblo, Colorado. George A. Ford, a son of Frank Ford, managed the South Dakota barn.

Ford & Harrington developed a national reputation as importers of high-quality European horses. By 1909, they sold 400 to 500 horses annually at a price range from $500 to $3,500 per horse. The firm began issuing annual catalogs with horses for sale. They hired the famous artist Lou Burk to draw illustrations of each horse offered for sale in the catalog.

Many families in Central Illinois can trace their ancestors back to the children of either Edward or James Harrington. For example, a granddaughter of Edward Harrington, Margaret Harrington (1900-1952), married Francis E. Rathbun (1900-1974). Her children included Margaret J. Rathbun (1920-2010), R. James Rathbun (1927-2013), and Duane A. Rathbun (1935-2021).

In Fairbury, Margaret Rathbun married Nelson "Jim" Claudon Jr. (1920-2013). The Claudon family is also one of Fairbury's long-time families.

Edward Harrington died in 1908 at the age of 89, and James Harrington died in 1911 at the age of 82. Both brothers are buried at Saint John's Catholic Cemetery just north of Fairbury. These two brothers and their descendants have played a crucial role in the development of Fairbury.